

KDHE Helps Bring Behavioral Health to Emergency Response

The first ever All-Hazards Behavioral Health Symposium was held on Oct. 6 and 7 at the Kansas Highway Patrol Training Academy in Salina. The symposium was a collaborative effort of KDHE, the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS), the Kansas Highway Patrol, the Adjutant General's Department, Kansas State University's School of Family Studies and Human Services and the University of Kansas Medical Center, Area Health Education Center.

The symposium's mission was to increase the knowledge base for behavioral health specialists in response to emergencies, including acts of terrorism, increase the visibility of behavioral health professionals' role in emergency response and to increase the knowledge of emergency responders to disaster-related behavioral health issues. The Kansas Bioterrorism Program provided the funding for the symposium.

The symposium kicked off with a panel discussion of state leaders including Major General Tod Bunting, the Adjutant General of Kansas, Kathy Harmon, assistant director of mental health at SRS, and Dick Morrissey, KDHE deputy director of health. General Bunting flew in by helicopter for the appearance on his way to survey flood damage in northeast Kansas.

Following the panel discussion, Ken Thompson, director of external affairs for the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, delivered a moving keynote address focusing on the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Thompson's presentation focused on the importance of behavioral health to the responders, the public, the victims, and their families.

The symposium was divided into five tracks representing various phases of an emergency: preparedness, response, recovery, individual responses, and special populations. All the presenters for the breakout sessions were from Kansas, giving the symposium a state-based focus and provided an opportunity for increased networking. Topics discussed included agroterrorism, brain development and trauma, behavioral health needs of first responders, state behavioral health planning and several other aspects of behavioral health in a crisis setting.

Response to the symposium was overwhelmingly positive with most behavioral health practitioners noting that conferences like this are few and far between. Participants from the response community noted that lessons learned from presentations at the symposium would likely bring about changes in their agency's behavioral health interactions.



Keynote speaker, Ken Thompson removes his microphone after his stirring presentation on the terrorist bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.